

Accused Saigon Deputy Blames U.S.

By Robert G. Kaiser
Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON, Feb. 17—**Tran Ngoc Chau**, the outspoken House deputy, today blamed American pressure for President Thieu's decision to prosecute him for "activities helpful to the Communists."

Chau claimed the United States feared that Thieu would use him to initiate direct talks with the Communists and bypass the Americans. Now, he charged, Thieu is prosecuting him in order to impress the Americans that this was never Thieu's intention.

Chau has long been a favorite of U.S. officials in Vietnam, and has many American friends. In an interview in his Saigon "hide-out" today, however, Chau spoke bitterly of the U.S. government, which he said was trying to "clean their hands" of him.

Chau, whose American



TRAN NGOC CHAU

... suspects U.S. policy

friends have been unable to protect him from the wrath of Thieu, said that he has "lost all faith" in U.S. policy. He warned other Vietnamese who have cooperated with the Americans to prepare for betrayal like the one he claims to have suffered.

The Chau case is the main attraction in Saigon's center ring these days. It combines—in one unruly package—three of the issues that concern this capital most: the American role in Vietnam, Thieu's feuds with his opponents and the status of Vietnamese democracy. This case may have important and lasting effects on the last two issues.

And the Chau case is resplendent with the little touches of Vietnam that boggle the Western mind. For example, the political gossips have been saying that Chau is sleeping in a different house every night, stealthily dodging Thieu's police. In fact, as this reporter discovered when he visited Chau this morning, he is living quite openly in a house that is elaborately staked out by some quite unsubtle plainclothesmen.

Very briefly, this is the story of Tran Ngoc Chau:

Now 46, he fought for the Vietminh until 1949, when he left the revolutionary movement to join the forces of the Emperor Bao Dai. He became an officer, rose quickly through the ranks and was soon immersed in a distinguished career.

He went to infantry school at Ft. Benning, Ga., in 1955-56, where he learned English, and also American ways. Thereafter Chau seemed always to get along well with Americans in Vietnam. His success as chief of Kienhoa Province in the early 1960s brought him to the attention of high American officials, who saw to it that he was promoted to important administrative jobs.

In 1967 he ran for the National Assembly from Kienhoa, and won an impressive victory. He was elected an officer of the House of Representatives, and began to establish a name for himself.

Meets With Brother

From 1965 onward, Chau was also leading a secret life—a life he shared only with a few Americans. In 1965 his brother and former Vietminh comrade, Tran Ngoc Hien, came secretly to Chau and announced he was a high-ranking North Vietnamese agent.

From then until early 1969, Chau and Hien met quite regularly. According to the testimony of both, each tried to convert the other. At the same time, they discussed possible approaches to a settlement of the war. According to Chau, he was trying to arrange talks among the warring Vietnamese factions, excluding the Americans, that might lead to a political settlement. He admits he pursued very

this idea without informing the Vietnamese government.

Hien was arrested last April. He confessed his intelligence activities in the South, and gave a detailed account of his talks with Chau. (The Washington Post published excerpts from Hien's confession on Jan. 5.)

Chau, meanwhile, began to speak critically of the Thieu government's policies. He called publicly for direct negotiations with the Vietcong before Thieu had accepted that idea. He also proposed a form of coalition government that would have given the Communists a share of power in the provinces and the National Assembly, but not in the executive branch.

Last July, Thieu told a group of legislators that Chau had had illegal contacts with the enemy. That began a complicated series of events—dominated by an emotional anti-Chau campaign conducted by Thieu himself—that has now ended with Chau formally accused of "activities helpful to the Communists."

He was protected by the Vietnamese equivalent of congressional immunity, but the government overcame this obstacle by promoting a petition in the House to withdraw the immunity in this case. The petition was allegedly signed by 102 members—exactly the three-fourths required by law—and a trial is expected soon.

Calls Charges Ridiculous

Today the accused man contended that the charges against him were ridiculous. Chau admitted that he talked to his brother, showed him some courtesies and failed to betray him to the government. But he denied giving him any significant help, and insisted that his contacts with Hien were intended only to try to convert his brother, and to bring an end to the war.

Chau admits that he did not inform any Vietnamese officials that he was talking secretly with his brother, a Communist spy. He defended this today on the ground that when his talks with Hien began, the South Vietnamese government was chaotic, run by generals whose "very strong" in recent

times, Chau said, he thought he had the right to conduct independent talks as a member of the National Assembly.

But, he added, he did think he should tell some Americans about his brother. Chau gave these details of his dealings with U.S. officials:

"Among those I informed after this first contact with Hien [in late 1965] were John Vann [an adviser in Vietnam since the early 1960s, now in charge of pacification in the Mekong Delta], Stuart Methven [described by Chau as a CIA employee], Thomas Donohue [another CIA man, Chau said], and ... the CIA station chief at the time."

U.S. Officials Informed

According to all the rules of diplomatic or military practice, contacts of this sort would have to be reported by such men to higher authority. If men as prominent as John Vann and a CIA station chief were involved, it seems certain all top U.S. officials in Vietnam must have been informed. Chau said as much in today's interview:

"Methven and Donohue told me they would inform the appropriate Vietnamese officials; Vann went to see the U.S. ambassador—I don't know which, [Eugene] Locke or [Henry Cabot] Lodge—and the ambassador said it was okay for me to continue my contacts" with Hien. Locke was then deputy U.S. ambassador.

Chau said two U.S. officials—Col. Mike Dunn, now a White House military aide who worked for Lodge, and a Mr. Adam, described by Chau as a CIA man—came to see him to find out what he was hearing from his brother.

During mid-1967, Chau related, his conversations with Hien and other factors persuaded him that the Vietcong would try to create uprisings in populated areas. In August 1967, he said, he gave a three-hour briefing on his theory to Ambassadors Ellsworth Bunker and Locke and several military officials, including Lt. Gen. Frederick Weyand.

Five months later the Communists launched the Tet offensive.

continue

Throughout 1968, Chau said, he continued to keep Americans—especially Vann—informed of his talks with Hien. The Americans “seemed pleased just to get more of the Communist assessment,” Chau said today.

Vann Intervenes

After Hien was arrested last April, Chau said, he went to see Vann at his headquarters in Cantho, the largest city in the Delta. According to Chau, “At the time, Ambassador [William] Colby [currently head of the U.S. pacification program] was in Sadec Province. Vann called him and got approval on the phone to see [Minister of the Interior Tran Thien] Khiem. The next day Vann saw Khiem.” Vann’s intervention on Chau’s behalf, he added, “seemed to delay the whole affair for some time.”

According to Chau, this was the last overt cooperation he got from his American friends. Ambassador Bunker refused to meet him, Chau claimed. Then, he added, the ambassador ordered all American officials to cease dealing with Chau.

“Bunker and the CIA believed Thieu would use me and my brother to make a secret arrangement for direct talks between the Vietnamese, without letting the Americans know about it,” Chau claimed.

He noted that he and Thieu had been friends since the time both were young lieutenants. But now, Chau said, Thieu responds primarily to Bunker. Chau said he believes he is being prosecuted to demonstrate to Bunker that Thieu has no plans for a secret deal.

New American Policy

Chau charged that there is a new American policy in Vietnam, intended to impose a minority government on the country that will be utterly dependent on U.S. aid, and therefore unable to negotiate its own end to the war.

The U.S. mission here is familiar with most of Chau’s claims that he was betrayed by the American government and abandoned in time of need. But the embassy has made no comment on Chau’s accusations, the first of which were published ten days ago. This unusual silence suggests orders from Washington not to talk.

Well before Chau’s accusations began, however, many embassy officials pri-

vately expressed displeasure with Thieu’s attempt to prosecute Chau and two other members of the House. The degree of displeasure these Americans have expressed has been unprecedented in the friendly American relationship with Thieu.

It was learned today that Bunker has told Thieu that the U.S. expects a variety of unfavorable consequences if Chau is sentenced to prison. Some of Bunker’s staff believe much damage has already been done by Thieu’s public campaign against the House.

If the Chau case opened a door on interesting aspects of the U.S. role in Vietnam, it has also provided an intriguing glimpse of Vietnamese democracy under pressure.

The legal issues in the case are complicated, though the basic facts of the alleged crime are simple and apparently agreed by all parties: It is against the law to give any help to Communists, and by Chau’s own admission he gave his brother some assistance—though he claims it was insignificant. For this reason, hawks among Saigon’s politicians are prepared to condemn Chau.

Symbolic Case

But there is some question as to whether this technical violation of the law is the real issue. An authoritative source in the presidential palace, for instance, said today that although Chau’s transgressions were not serious, the case against him would be pressed because “it symbolizes the anti-Communist spirit of the government.”

Phan Thong, a House member who chaired a committee that investigated the charges against Chau and found them justified, said in an interview today that he too saw more than legal issues behind the prosecution. Thong said the chief of the Special (Intelligence) Police told his investigating committee that Chau was “too ambitious in politics.” Thong suggested that Chau would have been left alone if he had not made his proposal for a coalition government.

Another complication involves the petition that the government says stripped Chau of his immunity. Many lawyers and legislators have

the House can substitute a petition for actual floor action. It is widely assumed that the government could not win a three-fourths vote on the floor, if only because attendance at the House is so poor.

Some politicians think Thieu’s petition ploy will do permanent damage to the procedures of the Assembly.

Deputy Thong said he thought the petition might not have been completely fair. But then, he added, Chau had ignored one article of the constitution by helping a Communist, so how could he expect protection from other articles of the constitution that stipulate proper parliamentary procedures?

It is hard to find a Vietnamese who really expects the government to follow strictly any prearranged set of laws and regulations. That is a Western notion.

Talk of Politics

So the talk among politicians about the Chau case tends to center more on politics and personalities than legalities. Some, including Chau himself, think Thieu is trying to intimidate all his opposition by his crackdown on Chau and the other two House deputies.

Those who subscribe to this theory deplore the president’s high-handedness and warn of more repression of the opposition, but the theory is hardly universal. Many of the most outspoken opponents of Thieu don’t accept it.

Another school theorizes that Thieu is damaging himself more than Chau or any other opponent by making such a big issue out of a small incident.

“It is like with Sen. Tran Van Don,” said an articulate member of the House, referring to another Thieu critic who has lately incurred presidential ire. “Thieu is building up Chau and other opponents by attacking them fiercely.”

Chau himself is the issue with some politicians. His critics call him vain, a self-promoter with an exaggerated sense of his own importance. Other say he just isn’t worth all the fuss.

Chau’s connection with the CIA has become an issue—several papers have attacked him as an American lackey. “Many Vietnamese think if Chau is so close to the CIA, he deserves some punishment,” a thoughtful editor said tonight.